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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism and the cultural and linguistic pluralism that it involves should be preserved and encouraged within the national educational system. Statistics concerning bilinguals on a national scale would present a more accurate picture if based on John Macnamara's definition of bilinguals as "persons who possess at least one of the language skills even to a minimal degree in the second language." The benefits of bilingualism, seen as linguistic and cultural pluralism, are unknown, but bilingualism has not been encouraged sufficiently to predict the benefits or the disadvantages. A national commitment to a program of bilingualism must be made before its true value can be known. (VM)

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PRESERVATION OF A NATIONAL RESOURCE AND PRESERVATION OF SELF

Joyce de Laricheliere

Given my name and home state, it may seem that my choice of topic is a chauvinistic one, that I have my own personal ethnic axe to grind. However, I like to think that my reasons have a more carefully considered base.

In a country like ours given to fads of all kinds and sizes, bilingual education is (maybe was, depending on future Congressional funding) another contemporary educational fad. Those of us who are convinced of the value and necessity of this type of education beyond the level of present interest need to look long and carefully at its pros and cons. Then we must be committed and dedicated to furthering it in an active way, and not merely take our cues from whatever legislation is in effect at a particular time. If I convey the impression that this is urgent, I think that it is. A number of languages, among them French, are facing a critical period. For some of them, the next twenty years could tell the story of their disappearance. Just as with biological species, the process is irreversible. Once gone it is virtually, if not totally, impossible to revive a language.

According to the 1960 census, there were slightly over a million French speakers in the United States. The great majority of these are concentrated in New England where they constitute significant proportions of the populations of each state.

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Approximately 25% of New Hampshire's population is French speaking, 20% of Maine's, 15% of Vermont's and there are substantial numbers in surrounding states. Outside of New England, Louisiana still has a fairly high number of French background people. Many others are scattered throughout the country. Numerically, French speakers cannot compare with Spanish speakers, but they and the present situation are important for the reasons detailed below.

Bilinguals, according to John Macnamara, are "persons who possess at least one of the language skills even to a minimal degree in the second language." According to this definition, one is more or less bilingual; there is a rising scale of bilingual abilities. Using this means of classification, rather than solely that of mother tongue, a truer picture of bilinguals and bilingualism would emerge. The question presents itself: if this more accurate data were available, would the desirability and need for more extensive bilingual education not be obvious? The number of 19 million NEMT's reported in the 1960 census would be swelled. The personal case I report now can surely be repeated many times. I spoke French as a first language. My sister, nine years younger than I, spoke English first. However, she still had enough contact with my grandmother and other relatives and now understands, speaks and reads French with varying degrees of skill. According to the census takers I am a NEMT but my sister is not. My point here is that the reported 11% of the population which is bilingual is way under the actual figure.

Another definition of bilingualism is pertinent here. Bilingualism by many is interpreted as meaning the acquisition of English by non-English speakers. A book, new two weeks ago to the best-seller list in Québec is: Le livre noir by the Association Québécoise des Professeurs de français. It speaks of the present propaganda campaign in Québec urging people to become bilingual: "une propagande....d'inciter les gens à devenir bilingues, c'est à dire à parler en anglais." Lieberson, also referring to the Canadian situation, says: "Bilingualism ...largely means the acquisition of English among those with a French mother tongue..." Many bilingual projects are considered ESL Projects, with mastery of English as the primary objective.

Bilingualism then for partisans of linguistic and cultural pluralism could be a dangerous condition. We all know personally cases in which the parents speak one language to the children, and the children answer in another. Because both are bilingual in that they possess "comprehension skill", there is communication. However, the second generation does not have the active language skills, speaking and writing, and is on its way to monolingualism. However, bilingualism in itself does not necessarily lead to loss of the mother tongue. It can be the final step in language contact or an intermediate one in the process of transition from linguistic pluralism to unilingualism. Both must be studied carefully---that is, bilingualism (or linguistic pluralism) as a terminal point and bilingualism as an intermediary stage before final unilingualism---since each has its partisans.

The benefits of cultural and linguistic pluralism, for the nation and for individuals, are many more than I will mention but I will comment on the most important ones. From bilingualism could come an appreciation of others, other nations and other individuals. It would be easier to develop a non-judgmental outlook regarding languages, customs, and attitudes which are not ours. I consider this change of attitude to be one of the most important reasons favoring pluralism.

Bilingualism could weaken ethnocentrism, so that a future America would not be guilty of Fishman's critical words: "We do have a world today in which the haves are shouting to the have nots: 'be rational, be reasonable, be successful, be like me...use English! In Quebec one can hear the slogan: "Speak white." It would be naive on our part to consider this irrelevant and not pertaining to our situation with the amount of American influence in all domains of Canadian life.

Bilingualism could be of enormous value in communication both in the country and out of it. It is only realistic to recognize that, after almost 200 years as a nation, we still have non-English speakers. Whatever one's beliefs regarding other languages, it would seem desirable to be able to communicate with one's countrymen. Outside the United States people do speak English; in fact, it is possible to "get by" all over the world. That's fine, if all one wants to do is get by. However, that's not real communication. There are examples ad infinitum, but no need to belabor the obvious.

The cultural (in the fine arts sense) benefits have always been recognized and, of course, are still a valid consideration.

On the other hand, is it possible that bilingualism could be a national Pandora's box which looks innocuous enough on the surface but is filled with potential troubles?

If ethnic groups maintain their languages, will they not remain outside the mainstream of American society? Mexican Americans, after 300 years in this territory, are now entering the current of American life and the ones who do succeed are fluent in English. Franco-Americans had a reputation until recently, for being unassimilable. When they forgot their French language and culture, so the argument goes, then they began to get ahead. Is language maintenance hurtful for them as a group and as individuals? Is language maintenance then also dangerous for the country? On a national level, would the United States go the way of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which split into diverse countries on the basis of common language and culture?

On of the benefits seen in cultural pluralism was the possibility for the decrease and disappearance of ethnocentrism. It has been said, however, that by nurturing the various ethnic groups here, we instead foster ethnocentrism. In a group, such as the Franco-American which has become far less visible in the recent past, the encouraging of bilingualism can be considered as bringing a dead issue back to life.

I have, honestly I think, considered these objections. In answer to the point regarding the harm done to ethnic groups by

non-assimilation, is harm not being done to them now? By repressing their language, their expression of themselves, more damage is being done. By now, we are all familiar with studies on attitudes and self-concept of bilinguals and their relation to forced assimilation.

As for bilingualism causing divisiveness and subsequent national chaos, I am not able to predict this. Divisiveness has not been averted by ignoring ethnic minorities; so it certainly would not hurt to try the other side of the coin. It is very possible that a group maintaining its own language is a potential threat to national order; national concepts can be rejected more easily by a group thus unified. However, if the national attitude were a positive one of accepting and fostering bilingualism, the areas of conflict would be significantly reduced. Joshua Fishman says this:

> E "I don't think we have to worry that the Bilingual Education Act or the fostering of genuine bilingualism in the United States for those who want it will be the ruination of the country. The ruination of the country is more likely to come, as it always has in the past, by the insiduous implication that by forgetting the prbblems, by forgetting oneself, by overlooking one's parents, by throwing away treasures that are rightfully„ one's heritage, one could help the country.

Ethnocentrism could be an initial stage in the development of widespread bilingualism. This is seen in Quebec and the southwest. Ethnic groups react against the linguistic repression and intolerance which has been shown them by going to their own extreme. With a positive, open attitude towards bilingualism from the linguistically dominant group, such reaction probably would not occur.

In summary, the benefits accruing from bilingualism, that is linguistic and cultural pluralism, are far greater than are the dangers. Both, at this time, are potential in that bilingualism (cultural pluralism) has neither been accepted nor rejected. It exists but the full benefit or harm to be derived from bilingualism is not yet to be seen. Bilingualism has not been tried and found wanting; it really has not been tried. There must be a national commitment before what I believe will be benefits can be seen in their full measure.

Government and education are among two of the most powerful institutions which influence maintenance or abandonment of non-English languages. In our country the government, for the most part, has not formulated policy for or against non-English tongues. The term "benign neglect", known to us in another context, has certainly been applicable to this situation. More than tolerance will be necessary if cultural pluralism is considered desirable and valuable. The Bilingual Education Act is evidence of the influence of the government's positive efforts.

Schools are ideal to provide a friendly setting for culturally diverse groups. Children learn many of their values regarding themselves, their own groups and other groups here. The results of an accepting climate, sensitive to ethnic groups, raises hopes and makes one believe that this Utopia where people are un-labeled individuals judged on their own personal merits and deficiencies.

At the present time, as I mentioned before, Franco-Americans are at a point of decision. The number of French speakers has declined from 1,412,060 in 1940 to 1,043,220 in 1960, a loss of

26%. states flatly that the French language and culture are dying out in New England. More and more Children from French background families come to school with a passive language skill at best. However, language loss has not reached the point of no return. There is a growing awareness in Franco-Americans of the necessity for action on their part. They and the surrounding non-French communities are actively supporting bilingual education to such a degree that facilities, funds and personel are being found insufficient for the demands.

It may seem as though I have belabored a point which needed no further elaboration. The country, especially in political leaders and educators, has experienced a change of heart with respect to minority groups, i.e. some institutions and some people have. However, it would be false to assume that this enthusiasm for and appreciation of cultural pluralism is shared by the majority of Americans. Too often, by only speaking with our own---language teachers to language teachers, bilingual project personel to bilingual project personel, etc.---we merely reinforce each other's beliefs and ideas, presuming them to be commonly held. Such agreement is not the case. Both antipathy and apathy regarding language maintenance are widespread and if this is not recognized and dealt with accordingly, the best efforts of the well-intentioned will be futile. French, for one, will disappear and we will all be the poorer for its loss.

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